

KINGDOM.

LESSON 23

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray for God's guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Commit your group and this lesson about preaching God's kingdom to the Lord.

2	SHARING (20 minutes) [QUIET TIMES] PSALMS 50, 51, 58 and 62
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Take turns and share (or read from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Psalm 50, 51, 58 and 62).

Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

3	MEMORISATION (5 minutes) [KEY VERSES IN ROMANS] (10) ROMANS 6:23
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Review two by two.

(10) Romans 6:23. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

4	TEACHING (85 minutes) [THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT
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The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:15-35 is a parable about **FORGIVENESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM.**

"A parable" is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. We will study this parable by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 9, supplement 1)

Read Matthew 18:15-35.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

The story of this parable has three parts:

A king shows mercy to his servant by cancelling his huge debt. A king wanted to settle accounts with his servants. These servants were not ordinary slaves, but high officials, probably provincial governors (satraps, cf. Daniel 6:1-2). Their duty was to collect the royal taxes in their provinces and to deliver these large sums of money to the king at the proper time. One by one, these servants were summoned to appear before the king. One servant was not able to pay. He owed the king ten thousand talents! One talent equalled six thousand denarii. One denarius was the wages earned by a labourer in one day. A labourer would have to work for about twenty years to earn just one talent! Thus, the debt this servant owed the king was such a great amount of money that he would never ever have been able to repay it to the king! Why he owed this amount, we are not told. He could have failed to collect the taxes, or failed to keep it save, or simply squandered it for his own purposes. The important thing is that his debt was absolutely impossible to pay off!

The king ordered that he and his whole family be sold into slavery in order to repay a small part of the debt. This practice of selling those who were unable to pay their debts was not a practice approved in Israel, but it was common to the neighbouring countries of Israel and a well-known practice.

The servant fell prostrate at the king's feet and begged for mercy. He did not deny that he owed this huge amount of money. He also did not try to explain how he got into this difficult situation. He must have realised that it was absolutely impossible to repay this huge debt, and yet he pleaded for patience and promised to pay back the whole amount! He said this in the hope to escape the terrible punishment.

The king took pity on him. Out of sheer compassion he cancelled his whole debt and let him go! The king did much more to him than he had asked or expected! The first part of the parable shows the almost unthinkable and certainly undeserved compassion and mercy of the king.

That servant refuses to cancel his fellow servant's petty debt. Outside, that servant met one of his fellow servants, who owed him only one hundred denarii. Compared to his own huge debt, this amount was a mere trifle. The amount of one hundred denarii was equal to about three months of wages! Before his fellow servant could even utter a word, the unmerciful servant grabbed him by the throat and began to choke him. He demanded immediate payment. The story does not tell us why he behaved so heartless. Maybe his hurt pride and deep humiliation for his failure of being a good steward in the eyes of others gave him a desire to revenge his humiliation on the first person he met.

His fellow servant also fell prostrate at his feet and begged for mercy. This servant was realistic about his debt. Unlike the unmerciful servant, he did not promise to pay back everything, but simply promised to pay back money. But the unmerciful servant remained unwilling and had him thrown in jail. Because his fellow servant's debt was so small, it was not legally permitted to sell him into slavery, but it was legally permitted to have him sentenced to prison and forced labour until he had worked off his debt. It was common practice to imprison and even torture such people in order to reveal where they might have stashed away their treasure or to induce their relatives and friends to pay the debt. The second part of the parable shows the cruelty of the servant who had been forgiven, but remained unmerciful.

The king re-imposed the cruel servant's former sentence and even made it worse. When the other servants witnessed the cruelty of the unmerciful servant, they reported everything to the king. The king summoned the servant he had forgiven and accused him of being a wicked servant, a villain. The cruel and unmerciful servant should have shown mercy to his fellow servant, *just as the king had done*. It was his duty not only to be grateful for the king's mercy, but also to actually follow the king's example in his conduct to his fellow men. It was his lasting obligation to forgive all those who had wronged him. With settled indignation, the king handed this cruel servant to the jailers to be tortured until he should have paid back everything he owed.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of "the story" of the parable may consist of "the setting" and "the explanation or application" of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Matthew 18:15-22.

The rule of discipline. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus taught his disciples that they should take the initiative to get reconciled with a brother who had sinned against them. Although the words "against you" in verse 15 is lacking in the best ancient manuscripts, they are implied (Luke 17:3-4), because the meeting with the erring brother was to be "just between the two of you". Also Peter's question in verse 21 implies a sin of a more private nature. Nevertheless, whenever the interests of the Church demand or allow it, the rule of Matthew 18:15 should be applied, not only to private sins, but also to public sins.

The question of forgiveness. Although Peter realised that a Christian *must take the initiative* to bring about a complete reconciliation, he wanted to know *how often* a Christian must show mercy to his erring brother (Matthew 18:21-22). This way of looking at spiritual matters and this manner of arguing looked like that of the Jewish teachers of the law. They taught that one must forgive the first, second and even third insult, but punish the fourth insult! It sounded as if "forgiveness" was a commodity that could be measured and manipulated; as if it could be parcelled out little by little until a certain definite was reached, beyond which a person should no more forgive! Peter's question was about the *extent* of forgiveness, and he himself thought that "seven times" was very reasonable!

However, Jesus answered that forgiveness was not some kind of commodity and also could not be expressed in a measureable quantity. Forgiveness is an attitude towards people that have wronged you. He said that a person must forgive his erring brother "seventy times seven times"! He does not mean literally 490 times. He is using the Jewish figurative numerology to indicate *something beyond the perfect number of times*. By multiplying two perfect numbers, "7" and "10" with another perfect number "7", Jesus intended to show that genuine forgiveness does not recognise boundaries or a certain definite limit. Forgiveness is a state of the heart and not a matter of calculation.

At this point, Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 18:23-34.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 18:35.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

Jesus does not give any of the details in the story of this parable any particular meaning. Therefore, the relevant details must be derived from the context or from other parts of the Bible.

The king and his two servants. In his application in Matthew 18:35, Jesus applies the central point to God, the Christian and the erring brother. Only these aspects have relevance. He says, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” “The pity and mercy of the king” represents God’s mercy. “The pity and mercy of the servant”, which he should have shown to his fellow servant, represents the forgiveness, which a Christian should give to his erring brother.

The ten thousand talents and one hundred denarii. The huge amount consisting of “10000 talents” represents the enormous debt (guilt) of a person’s sins against God! By nature every human being has this great debt against God. The amount is so huge in order to indicate that no one could pay this debt to God! It is humanly impossible to repay this debt caused by your own sins in your own way to God! Only God himself would be able to forgive such a great guilt!

The small amount of “100 denarii” represents the debt of another Christian against the first Christian. The amount is still substantial (equal to three months wages), but it is humanly possible to repay this debt! A Christian is always able to forgive the relative small sins of another Christian against him!

These two amounts do not represent specific sins and also not specific amounts. They only represent an unthinkable large amount and in comparison to that, a trifle.

The jailers who torture. These details are not given any specific meaning, but represent the final judgement, when each person will receive what is due to him. “For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him, for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

All the other details of the story of this parable should not be given any particular significance. They only serve to strengthen the story of the parable.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (the central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23-35 teaches about “forgiveness in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of the parable is the following. “There is a direct link between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness. That is, there is a direct link between the forgiveness we receive from God and the forgiveness we give to someone who sins against us. A Christian, whose sins have been forgiven, must always be willing to forgive whoever sinned against him.”

He must not only do this out of gratitude that God has forgiven him his sins, but also because God demands that he follows in God’s footsteps and do to others what God has done to him. Because God has forgiven the Christian, the Christian must forgive all who have committed a transgression against him! A Christian must let go of his claim to his rights and let grace triumph over his rights! *Genuine love demands the exclusion of natural self-love!*

Forgiveness is one of the basic characteristics of God’s kingdom. The people of God’s kingdom must not be unmerciful or cruel towards their erring brothers, but must repeatedly forgive them their trespasses (Matthew 6:12,14-15).

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

(1) The parable of the defendant.

Read Matthew 5:25-26.

Discover and discuss. How do these two parables about forgiveness in God’s kingdom compare?

Notes. “The parable of the defendant” in Matthew 5:25-26 is also a parable about “forgiveness in God’s kingdom”. The main message of this parable is the following. “The moment to reconcile yourself with your opponent is always now!”

Forgiveness is one of the basic characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom may not postpone the reconciliation with a brother or sister with whom they are angry, *because “tomorrow” may be too late!* The person, who refuses to make an earnest attempt at reconciliation, will never be able to pay his debt.

While “the parable of the unmerciful servant” teaches that reconciliation with an erring brother or sister is absolutely necessary and indispensable for reconciliation with God, “the parable of the defendant” teaches that such reconciliation may not be delayed!

(2) Slavery and torture.

Discover and discuss. What does the Bible teach about slavery and torture?

Notes.

The practice of selling someone into slavery. *Read* Exodus 22:3; Leviticus 25:8-10,39-43; 2 Kings 4:1; Nehemiah 5:4-6; Isaiah 50:1; Amos 2:6; 8:6. According to Exodus 22, the practise of selling a person into slavery was only permitted in the case of a thief or a robber. According to Leviticus 25, an Israelite sold into slavery, must not be treated as a slave, but as a temporary hired labourer and he must be released in the Year of Jubilee. 2 Kings 4 did not approve of slavery, but only reported it. Later, in Nehemiah 5, enslavement for debt was condemned.

According to Isaiah 50, the Lord said by means of two pictures that he had not sent Israel into exile and slavery to Babylon, but that Israel herself was the cause of her exile and slavery. God had not given Israel *a certificate of divorce*, which would have proved that he had rejected Israel. And he had not *sold Israel into slavery*. The fact that Israel was rejected and was sold into slavery was due to her own sins!

According to the prophet Amos, the Lord condemned the selling of people into slavery! The conclusion is that the practice of selling people into slavery was not approved in an unqualified way. In the countries outside Israel, the selling of people who could not repay their debts was common. It is to this practice that the parable of the unmerciful servant refers.

The practice of torture. *Read* Revelation 9:5; 18:6-7. Matthew 18:34 says, “In anger the master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed”. These torturers in the ancient Middle East were officials appointed by the courts to torture people who had committed atrocious crimes. Again, the Bible does not approve of torture, but only reports that it happened in that part of the world. It was not a part of Jesus’ teaching, but only a part of Jesus “story”.

In the book of Revelation, God commands the instruments of carrying out his holy anger against the sin of the unholy city of Babylon, to repay her fully for what she has done to others. He does this in figurative language. He does not specify who his instruments of punishment are. They are everyone and everything God uses to carry out his judgements.

“Paying back double” means “giving her the full equivalent” of the punishment she deserves. Because there is no atonement for Babylon’s sins, “her sins” and “the just punishment for her sins” are of equal proportion and serve as two equal halves that make one whole, thus perfectly just! Her deeds towards others included cruel and merciless torture and the killing of people. She caused unimaginable grief to others. In God’s judgement, she will receive her just punishment!

(3) Teachings about forgiveness.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach, compare to what the parable teaches?

Notes.

Romans 3:23. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. *All people on earth are debtors and need God’s forgiveness!* (Cf. Psalm 130:3-4; Matthew 18:23)

Psalm 49:7. “No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him – the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough.” *No one can pay the debt on another’s behalf.* (Cf. Matthew 18:25; Romans 3:20).

Romans 3:19. Every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be held accountable to God. The debt to God must be paid in another way! (Cf. Matthew 18:23-24; Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:18).

Romans 3:24. All believers in Jesus Christ are justified freely by God’s grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. He was appointed to be the means of atonement for sins. This means that the moment a person believes in Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ becomes the sacrifice of atonement for his sins and the guilt of his sins are cancelled (Matthew 18:27; 20:28; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

2 Corinthians 9:15. “Thanks be to God for his incredible gift!” It should not be very difficult to forgive another person that has transgressed against you, because what we owe God is many times more than what another owes us!.

Matthew 6:12-15. “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. It teaches that a person can only be certain

that his own debts or sins are cancelled if he himself cancels the debts of those who transgressed against him. Assurance of forgiveness is only possible when a person has also forgiven those who sinned against him. God will certainly not forgive any person, who harbours hatred or revenge! Christians should forgive others as God forgave them. But if they do not forgive others their sins against them, then God will also not forgive them their sins against him. God will not forgive a person who refuses to forgive others (Cf. Matthew 18:32-34; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12-14)!

Matthew 5:23-24; 18:17. Who should take the first step towards reconciliation: the person, who inflicted the injury or the person who suffered the injury? The answer of Jesus is, “Both!” Matthew 5:23-24 says “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” Here Jesus teaches that *the guilty person should take the initiative*.

Matthew 18:15 says, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” Here Jesus teaches that *the innocent person should take the initiative*.

In God’s eyes, it is not important who started the problem, but that reconciliation takes place! God holds both parties responsible to take the initiative towards reconciliation!

6. A summary of the main teachings or lessons of these parables about forgiveness in God’s kingdom.

(1) What God is like.

All people must know what God is like. One great lesson of these parables is that they show the unimaginable merciful and forgiving spirit of God. Our sins in God’s eyes may be compared to the debt of ten thousand talents, an amount that no one can ever pay back to God! While the debt we owe God, due to our sins, can never be paid by anyone of us, Jesus Christ paid the debt for everyone who believes in him! He died on the cross to make atonement for all the sins of those people who accept him (cf. John 1:12), for all the people who belong to him (cf. John 10:11)! “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord (Jesus Christ) will be saved” (Romans 10:13).

(2) What Christians should be like.

Christians must know what they should be like. Another great lesson of these parables is that they teach us what God wants us to be and to do. It teaches that we must go and get reconciled to every person against whom we harbour a grievance or who may have some grievance against us! It teaches that we must not delay to forgive and get reconciled. We must forgive now and get reconciled immediately, *because “tomorrow” it may be too late!* Forgiveness is one of the basic characteristics of God’s kingdom! The genuine people of God’s kingdom do not harbour grudges, nor keep accounts of other people’s sins against them, but immediately take the initiative to forgive and to get reconciled (1 Corinthians 13:5). The genuine people of God’s kingdom must not be unmerciful or cruel towards their erring brothers, but must forgive them their trespasses again and again and again (Matthew 6:12,14-15).

5	PRAYER (8 minutes)	[REACTIONS] PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD
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Take turns in the group *to pray short* to God in response to what you have learned today.
Or divide the group into two’s or three’s and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

6	PREPARATION (2 minutes)	[ASSIGNMENT] FOR NEXT LESSON
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(Group leader. Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. **Commitment.** Be committed to make disciples, build the church and preach the kingdom.
2. **Preach, teach or study** “the parable of the unmerciful servant” together with another person or group of people.
3. **Personal time with God.** Have a quiet time from half a chapter of **Psalm 71, 73, 78 and 82** each day. Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. **Memorisation.** Daily **review** the last 5 memorised Bible verses. (6) Romans 4:5, (7) Romans 5:1-2a, (8) Romans 5:3-4, (9) Romans 6:13, (10) Romans 6:23.
5. **Bible study.** Prepare the next Bible study at home. **Romans 6:12-23.** Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
6. **Prayer.** Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
7. **Update your notebook** on preaching God’s kingdom. Include your notes on quiet time, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.